

The expansion of consciousness, the creation of timelessness and the generation of new worlds embody beauty without boundaries in Van McElwee's video art. His reconstructed realities captivate participants with a mesmeric hold that lasts far beyond the temporal end of a work. McElwee generates consistent surface textures using a technique that can be seen as a contemporary and electronic extension of collage. Approaching his video art with an astonishing amount of image density and rich ethnography, McElwee layers footage from diverse global locations allowing innumerable images to collide at the same moment and within the same visual space.

The pleasure present in McElwee's art lies in the delicate balance between his sophisticated style and his sense of playfulness. Since he derives inspiration from many sources—without extolling the value of one over another—his video pieces (eight to 18 minutes in length) afford numerous levels of entry that make them accessible to viewers with a diverse range of sensibilities. In *Folded Follies—Improvisations on the deconstructionist follies at Parc La Villette, Paris* (1993), he transforms the exteriors of buildings designed by Bernard Tschumi into a Pandora's box of shuffled angles and folded sound. What appear deceptively as inert objects or stationary structures are dynamically transformed into plasticized components free to move within the screen space with a metallic clang similar to a tuning fork.

Architectural accoutrements gain graphic weight in McElwee's closest approximation of the silk screening process in *Bindu* (1993), Sanskrit for "universal seed point." Pictures germinate into shoots of primary colors that pierce a white video canvas accompanied by the sound of waves and wind. In *Transfinite Loops* (1996), the sound of wind underscores the lights of amusement park rides that adopt a graphic quality as McElwee interlaces multiple sinewy clusters of reemerging patterns. A vivid video origami erupts into a colorful blizzard of fluorescent Ferris wheel flowers leading out of time and space. By orchestrating fades to black in *Folded Follies*, Van McElwee cultivates an alertness in the viewer that he perpetuates through instilling such reflective moments in the midst of his kinetic art. The meditative fades in *Fragments of India* (1993) serve as calms before the storms as the sound and image whirl together like dervishes. As a viewer tunes into *Radio Island* (1997), the Japanese penchant for integrating modern structures into ascetic ones resonates revealingly. As frequencies soar into the stratosphere on McElwee's soundtrack, radio transmissions sound more pulsar-like and cosmic than human and terrestrial. McElwee makes visible the intermingling of manmade and natural elements as power lines become like organic branches and pagodas pulsate with an inner life. He supplies a fluid vision that stimulates neural enlightenment.

McElwee delves into the nature of duality—dualities that the artist discovers and those that he creates. He toys with the real and its replica while finding familiarity in the foreign. In *Luxor—a Moment in Hyper Reality* (1998), McElwee integrates footage of Luxor, Egypt with its reproduction in Las Vegas. Egyptian bazaars and street life meld with Vegas casinos and slot machines. With its resplendent images, *Luxor* lures us into glittering hieroglyphic displays and sparkling sands as we ponder the mystery of where one location ends and another begins.

McElwee also jumps from one location to the next as if merging into an altered state in *Confluence* (1999). He develops organic correspondences in the locomotion of faceless crowds by editing them into a new context while maintaining the interpenetration of time and space into one continuous form. McElwee cuts back and forth between live fish in an aquarium and meat in a butcher's case. A daytime shot in one part of the world interchanges with a night time shot in an entirely different space yet we register these two locations as one unit merely oscillating between

night and day. The correspondence of architectural shapes highlighted by parabolic camera movement confirms the effectiveness of this illusion. McElwee contrasts convex and concave forms with building recesses and relief carvings. In *Fragments of India*, the wide-angle view circles within spiral spaces reproducing the form of a Mobius loop wrapping serpentine-like throughout temples. A bell clangs in a call to worship. When we hear its ring, McElwee focuses on a cupola as if metonymically matching the shape of the dome to the shape of the sound.

McElwee tangibly constructs cerebral architecture with unifying and sculptural sound composing a mystifying temporal elasticity. In *Space Splice* (1994), McElwee's fish-eye lens steadily wanders among countless settings as he creates a new folded space that advances in time stretching out into infinity. Although traces of life are evident, we never encounter any actual people because the viewers are the subject of his work. Walkways, paths and trajectories collide to associatively link locales. Eventually these realms converge, transporting us to a higher level. *Space Splice* climaxes with a collage of so many layers that it ends in a storm of video snow and audio drone. Every door in this assemblage of spaces leads inward as we are left to ponder if we ever truly penetrate.

Although many of McElwee's perceptual vehicles exist as single-channel videotapes, their dimensions have also been extended in his gallery installations. These extensions allow spectators the luxury of passing through McElwee's video spaces and choosing which dimension to occupy for any particular duration of their journey. This past spring, Vienna's Trabant Gallery exhibited an installation of *Radio Island* at Amsterdam, Brussels and Frankfurt art fairs. People attending these fairs could view the work on four screens. The images present on this tower of monitors became architectonic. Vertical structures gave the appearance of beginning and extending from the first screen on the bottom to the fourth on top, expanding the terrain of the image as well as inviting the mind to explore the constructed geography.

Where many video structures might entropy, McElwee's visual sculptures instead accelerate into an energizing overdrive without depletion. This effect is durative; it persists as lingering traces in one's consciousness—an eviternal amalgamation filling a given moment in order to transcend it. Past and present merge to move into an ever-changing yet everlasting awareness of the future. McElwee's work is challenging; it compels us to experience, perceive and ultimately to live more fully.

McElwee's oeuvre includes over 30 videos and installations that have been exhibited extensively in festivals, galleries and museums worldwide. This summer, the Forum for Contemporary Art in St. Louis has filled its entire third floor with McElwee's single-channel work and six video installations including *Cloud Catcher*, *Equilibrium* and *Procession* (all completed earlier this year). A recent video installation, *Transport*, was purchased by Columbus, Ohio's Science Museum. This piece is projected onto four suspended screens in the museum's new facility.

McElwee's video art has been broadcast widely in Europe and has been shown on 260 PBS stations in the United States. In addition to receiving seven fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts Independent Production Fund, he was given a travel grant from the Government of India, awarded The Experimental Video Award at the Athens International Film and Video Festival and garnered six nominations for the International Award for Media Art (sponsored by ZKM in Germany). His much-deserved awards include The American Film Institute Independent Filmmaker Award and the Director's Choice and Director's Citation Awards from the Black Maria Festival. His videos are archived in numerous international collections and are distributed by Argos in Belgium, Heure Exquise! in France, The Kitchen in New York and The Lux in London.

(T. L. Reid originally conducted the following interview with Van McElwee in August 1999 at Webster University, St. Louis, MO. Text from multiple follow-up inquiries has been integrated.)

T. L. Reid: Please describe your artistic background

Van McElwee: Actually, I started off in painting and printmaking. I was also experimenting with sound recordings as a way of structuring time in a spatial, non-musical way. In graduate school I made a transition into time-based media: film, video, audio synthesizers and multi-track recording. At first I saw video as a form of electronic printmaking. It's funny now, but the notion of combining images and sound in video was a revelation to me. It was a huge breakthrough to realize that both directions could converge in one medium. Now I'm using video to generate still images. I'm extracting images from their temporal flow and creating new relationships between those images. For example, I am almost finished with a piece entitled *Polychronon*. It consists of about 500 video stills clustered in different ways and pinned to a wall.

TLR: How do you think your familiarity with the art forms of assemblage and collage has influenced your own technique?

VM: The important thing about collage is how the viewer completes it and creates his or her own relationships. Video is naturally a collage medium with a multitude of possible combinations between images and sounds. I did traditional collage before I did video.

TLR: You use very distinct and textured musical scores that seem to emanate from the actual source. How do you discover your soundtracks?

VM: Sound and image are two aspects of one composition that work in a back and forth relationship with one another, seemingly in constant conversation. But the actual piece is something else; to me, it is a synaesthetic form that is structured by editing. It's a pattern that coordinates pictures and sounds. One of the problems with video is that images can rob sound of its power to evoke images and sound can rob images of their silence. So what can sound and image together evoke? One answer, I believe, is a sense of being, a quality of existence.

TLR: In *Confluence*, is it natural sound that you are manipulating?

VM: It's the sound from the location. Both sound and image were recorded together and edited into a pattern of relationships.

TLR: At times, the sounds are similar to percussive music.

VM: It is similar to music but ultimately something different, a different creature. I think of my work as existing somewhere between architecture and music, which articulate time and space in different ways. Video can play among the boundaries between those two worlds; it can claim its own territory there.

TLR: Where do the inspirations for your pieces come from?

VM: I keep notebooks. I draw and write down ideas. Connections form from these, sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly. They form clusters and when the clusters light up, I start shooting.

TLR: How do you find the locations that you use in your work?

VM: Usually I start with an idea and then I find a location. The work is almost the opposite of documentary, which explores a subject, revealing aspects of it. With me, a subject is a jumping off point. The recorded image is not an end but a beginning. It's a material to be manipulated. *Fragments of India* came from thinking about universal aspects of temple architecture, of structures that are shaped and disciplined by religious symbolism. I wondered if it would be possible to translate those elements into a time-based medium such as video. I received a grant from the government of India and permission from the Archaeological Survey of India to shoot at certain sites. *Fragments of India* includes images and sounds from Hindu and Jain temples, Muslim tombs, mosques and market-places. At the Experimental Television Center in Newark Valley, NY, I was able to restore the quality of red sandstone throughout the piece. Sounds weave in and out with mantra-like rhythms. Actually, this collage can be seen as a documentary reference to the layered complexity of Indian culture. So, I've contradicted myself already!

TLR: You capture the momentum of different lives, times and processes but you do not necessarily distinguish their actual meaning. It seems as though what matters more is what you see and how these elements connect.

VM: Yes. I would really like for video to have the same freedom as music, the same potential for play and experimentation and unusual ideas. I want the work to *be* something, not just be *about* something.

TLR: I also enjoy the fact that you are not developing a typical dramaturgy or a narrative. Rather, it's a collection of experiences and you create these environments that someone can sit down in and bring their own personality to and have their own experience with your work.

VM: In my work, the viewer is the protagonist, the center of the piece. It's not so much about people as it is for people.

TLR: You don't have to worry about the difficulty that arises when you're not able to connect to a character in a piece.

VM: Absence of traditional narrative can fall into two categories: a collection of unformed, fragmentary impressions not even organized into a timeline, or a non-linear mesh of overlapping events, a multi-linear fabric that embraces many individual stories.

TLR: With your video it always seems that you are constantly in the now.

VM: I think that experience is part of video's immediacy. Video is nowever.

TLR: Is that why you prefer working in video as opposed to film?

VM: Yes. Also, film looks real so I'd rather work in video. Video is a great synthesizer. It can melt so many different elements down into one substance, one signal. *Luxor* is a good example of this. The reality of both the real and the replica is called into question and then re-established in the electronic medium. From the beginning, I was attracted to video because it's reproducible and transmissible, transfluent through various media. Video doesn't have an aura, it is an aura.

TLR: In *Transfinite Loops* you're able to transform real amusement park rides into metaphors of abstract significance. You tape the park at night so it already looks very different than how we're used to perceiving it.

VM: I wanted the images to have a quality that would move them into the symbolic realm. I was reflecting on the tendency of humans to create elaborate metaphysical structures in the face of chaos. It unfolds like a series of thoughts. Time and space move from background to center stage, are unraveled and woven back together into intricate knots. I've designed a new installation for this footage. It's a mirror image, a positive-negative reflection projected into the corner of a room.

TLR: What works do you view as having been pivotal for you in your emergence as an artistic force and which ones continue to influence you?

VM: I always have a hard time with that question. In video, the work of Steina Vasulka comes to mind. Even a long list would be a distortion. My wife Linnie, who is also an artist, is an essential creative force in my work. I owe a lot to many of my teachers, especially Howard Jones. I usually don't find inspiration in art, although it may act as a catalyst. I find inspiration in noise, in nature, in fake things, in ruins and construction sites, in overlapping sounds, and in concepts that I barely understand. I've always been preoccupied with form, not as opposed to content, but in relation to formlessness, an idea I owe to the East.

TLR: Which aspects of architecture inspire you?

VM: The experience of interior and exterior and all the associations of moving from inside to outside and outside to inside, architecture as a system of openings. Doors as transitions. I love Winston Churchill's remark that we shape our buildings and our buildings shape us. I believe that. There's a dreamlike quality to architecture yet there's a rational clarity that frames and gives meaning to the more complex and chaotic aspects of our experience.

TLR: In *Space Splice*, even though you show all of these different locations, they seem to be different levels of the same place

VM: *Space Splice* is an imaginary network of places, an architecture for the mind. Video can transform a physical space into a psychological space. And it's true that there are no pictures of people in that space. "Instead, there are living, breathing people there—the viewers."

TLR: I was curious how you change the pacing within your pieces. Is that something that's done on site or something that is done in editing?

VM: The tape speed is altered, or it is changed in the computer. It's done in editing.

TLR: Would you explain the role of the mobius loop in your pieces?

VM: For a long time, I've used what I call a "Mobius Loop." A Mobius film loop is one that has been rotated 180 degrees before splicing. So with each repetition, the image is flipped left to right. In my piece *Mobius Film Loop Propellers* (1982), a spinning red propeller, against a background of windblown trees, enters and floats diagonally through the screen and then repeats itself, but in the other direction. One thing that fascinates me about a Mobius Film Loop is that the movement of the object could be explained in several different ways. You could be looking at two endless lines of propellers intersecting at the screen or a helix of propellers moving straight up or it could just be one propeller moving in and out of the screen, weaving an infinity symbol.

TLR: Are there any editing principles that you use to structure your pieces?

VM: I don't even know where to begin to answer that—it's a great question. There's a helical tendency throughout my work. The spiral is important to me, not so much as an image, but as a principle; because it's a circle with a dimension added. The cycle is broken and a new form is born, one that is open-ended and evolutionary. I think of a recorded fragment as a noisy, intricate waveform to be modulated by the edit-form. Altering the world in this way can have symbolic power. It's a good use of video. Also, I like to play along the border of order and disorder—chaos as the generator of newness. This gives wildness to a video work and it's what makes every particle in the world unique. I take a piece to a level of complexity at which it becomes something beyond which I can't see. Simplicity reasserts itself.

TLR: How many images have you actually layered?

VM: In *Radio Island and Refraction* (1990), there were several hundred levels. The result is a field of noise and as simpler shapes begin to emerge from this texture, the whole image becomes more and more organized. In *Refraction*, the viewer experiences over twenty million edits in five minutes. People think that my math is flawed when I say that, but it's true; because when you combine looping, layering and high tape speeds, you can climb to those numbers very quickly. You're just copying edits and folding them back in at higher speeds and denser levels.

TLR: What kind of equipment do you use?

VM: For *Refraction*, I used one-inch tape for speeding and a conventional switcher for mixing. I wasn't concerned about generation loss. The way I work now is a combination of linear and non-linear editing techniques. I edit onto D3 tape, a digital format that allows real-time combining of images from one source. As those layers go down, I can delicately control the relative strength of the channels through a switcher. Then into Media 100, for a different type of editing, then it's just back and forth between the linear and non-linear systems. The sound, once again, is a combination

of techniques. Sometimes the sound is edited with the video image or maybe I'll take sounds recorded on location and go directly into the audio studio and just concentrate on sculpting and reconstructing them for a while. It's a combination of sync-sound in some cases and in others it's highly engineered sound that's re-introduced in a collage fashion into the video.

TLR: Are those actual transmissions in *Radio Island*?

VM: Yes, it's a lot of short-wave radio signals, data transmissions, signals ricocheting around in the stratosphere, as well as the sounds of an analog synthesizer. There's synchronization and a harmonizing of the different elements. It's very noisy on one level but there are chords and harmonies occurring. There's a harmony between the image and the sound.

TLR: Do you do anything to prepare yourself for production?

VM: I meditate. Not so much in preparation because I'm always working on several pieces at once but meditation influences my work.

TLR: Do you see your art as having meditative qualities?

VM: Well, you could list among my inspirations the Tantric arts of Mantra and Yantra (Yantra is the visual equivalent of a mantra). The idea that certain visual and aural patterns can have a transformative power is one that I've been fascinated with for at least 30 years. And I do make discoveries from watching the movement of my own mind. So some of that may come across in the work.

TLR: How do eastern philosophies figure into your work? At moments you fade to black, instilling a feeling of meditative breath or a newly formed thought.

VM: The flow of thoughts both in and out of meditation naturally gives form to the work. In a way, it relates back to photography or any sort of recording as being a beginning rather than an ending. This is using video the way we use our nervous systems: impressions flow in, and dreams and visions pour out.

TLR: How do you construct your pieces for installation?

VM: A video screen in a room is a world within a world. In my installations, there's a direct correspondence between those worlds. Since there are four dimensions local to each screen, their relationship is important. The real space of the viewer can become a kind of hyperspace. A temporal event can be spread out in space and people can literally walk around in it. Recently, I was in Cambodia at Angkor Wat. The story of the Ramayana (the Hindu epic) unfolds in sculpted relief around the temple's outer walls. Rather than the frieze being simply a decoration, I believe that the entire temple, which is laid out as a vast mandala with its highest point at the center, is a representation of the Ramayanaj interior, celestial aspect. This seems to be expressed in a language of horizontals representing time, and verticals representing a dimension perpendicular to time, in

other words: eternity. I'm now trying to bring a similar dimensionality to video installation without the specific religious content.

TLR: So you are using time and space to go beyond actual time and space.

VM: Exactly. To make a new vantage point for the viewer. An arrangement of monitors on which various changes can manifest a form that has more than four dimensions. If you can see time, then you are outside of that time. For example, in Brussels last year, I showed *Confluence* on six large monitors arranged in an aperspectival, irregular grouping around a large gallery. The piece would appear unpredictably on the different monitors. The installation was conceived as a cross section of a shape that was outside of the time and place of the gallery. I'm developing that with other installations as well. In *CloudCatcher* I'm using the four screens as points of a tetrahedron which is imagined as a device that "captures" shapes as they pass through the three dimensions of the gallery.

TLR: Have you noticed that many of your works might have a hypnagogic effect on the viewer?

VM: I have to use my own nervous system as the guinea pig, so if it works for me then I have to hope it will work for someone else. Altering the world in video is a way of altering awareness, both mine and the viewer's. I want to make an environment that someone would like to inhabit.

TLR: Have you ever lapsed into a trance-like state when watching one of your pieces?

VM: I don't know if I would describe it as a trance but I feel different before and after watching one of them. It takes me somewhere. Other people have said that they feel the same thing. I'd rather cast a spell than make a point. I'd like for it to be a spell of wakefulness. You know, I don't want to hypnotize anybody or put them to sleep. I want to help them be awake.

TLR: The experience of watching your work is hypnotizing yet energizing.

VM: It's okay for the viewer to merge with the piece but I don't want them to become part of an illusion occurring on the screen. The reality is that they are experiencing the medium. In my installations, the display mechanism is part of the piece. This means sometimes putting monitors in irregular dusters, subverting their frontality, having them facing away from or even toward one another. It's significant to me that the sound and image arrive from an invisible place that something moves through digital, magnetic, electrical, auditory and visual realms and becomes part of the observer. The mere fact of a projection has many ramifications.

TLR: Is that part of the reason that during a screening of your work you'll break the pieces up with a statement between each, pulling participants out of one experience to prime them for the next one?

VM: It's to keep each piece separate in the viewer's memory. I see memory as the real, the primary medium and I want the work to produce patterns that will change and evolve with the viewers. It's like a mantra, or a melody; an image that continues in the mind. It's important that each piece be distinct from the others in a show. The turning on of the lights and talking is more a matter of



cleansing the palette, so to speak, and if people have questions or concerns maybe. I can help them move in the right direction with the work.

TLR: Certainly your work stands on its own. It's nice to know where things originate from but viewers don't have to know. What's the point of the piece if it has to be explained?

VM: In a way that relates back to your earlier question about inspiration and ideas. It seems that I start out by wondering what video really is and how it can best be used. But whatever bits of theory that I come up with have usually been born out in pieces that I've already done. So it seems like the work comes from the ideas, but it's equally true that ideas come from the work. That is how it should be. I think that theory should follow art, not the other way around.

TLR: Are there techniques that you have not used before that you would like to integrate into future pieces?

VM: Actually, I do have some ideas that will require the use of morphing, not to "shape-shift" as in the movies, but to cause time to subtly mutate. I'm also working on several Internet ideas that I'm very excited about. These are related to physical installations and one is based on the Atomium, in Brussels, [a famous aluminum and steel monument from which one can view the city that is designed to represent nine atoms of a molecule].

TLR: Are there unseen places or structures that you would like to explore?

VM: Yes, I'm very interested in a new computer-designed building by the Dutch architect Lars Spuybroek. It's a bizarre, fluid structure unlike any other. I plan to use it as a point of departure for a new video piece. I have begun post-production on this project. This building was born in a computer. In my piece, it will jump again into video where it can mutate freely. Particles will be changed back into pixels, matter into light. The building will be melted, frozen, pulverized and melted again into something new and totally transmissible.

TLR: What else are you currently working on?

VM: I'm fine-tuning my installation, *Procession*, which consists of parade footage shot over a period of years from the same vantage point in a parking garage. This river of images and sounds is modulated in various ways by the edit—form, folded and blended back on itself. This results in some strange juxtapositions of characters and forms, which move in and out of phase, compounding into echoes or coalescing into bristling, luminous clouds. In the installation, different parts of *Procession* cycle on a row of six monitors. The line of screens, each with its local time and space, becomes a storyboard of infinite recurrences, a standing pattern in space-time that viewers can actually move around in.

TLR: What have you discovered to be the most significant challenges in working with video?

VM: Riding the wave of technology over the years has been exhilarating, but having to constantly learn new tools is a challenge. I'm not a gadgeteer; I don't enjoy the equipment as an end in itself.

It's interesting that earlier you said the fades to black are like breaths, because I do think of it that way. The fades to black are a rest and also a way of organizing piece into packets of information which are more easily absorbed. The military found that by pulsing a laser, it has a more destructive force than a steady stream. So, although what I'm doing is not destructive, the same principle applies. If you alternate or pulsate something, it actually has more force. So I think it's important to go to black. In film, you have black in between each frame. In video, you have to create it. In my work, there's a self-similarity throughout the entire piece. There's the entire form—the parts, the parts of the parts, and so on, all the way down to the frame, which, by the way, happens to be a loop. It's like a complex wave form made up of other gradating waves. There's a helical tendency through the whole thing. There's also a sort of vortex. These areas could be the fade to black or where the piece dips in and out of manifestation.

TLR: Which aspects of working in video do you find most rewarding?

VM: Well, the planning phase, the part where an idea has you, is like being in love, very blissful and giddy. Shooting can be strenuous and has a greedy, treasure-hunt excitement about it that I enjoy. Editing, for me, is the most psychologically demanding stage of the process. But to answer your question, editing is my favorite part. It's amazing to see the piece come into existence, to see how the original idea plays out, how it changes and how it stays the same, and what it can teach me.

T. L. REID is currently working toward a Ph.D. on the influence of Surrealism in animated film at the University of Kent at Canterbury in England.

Ed. note: McElwee's exhibition "Recent Works: Six Consecutive Video Installations" will be on view until July 29 at the Forum for Contemporary Art in St. Louis, MO.